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ABSTRACT

In December, 1991, the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer (Washington, D.C.), in cooperation with the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (California), conducted a random national survey of two-year college presidents to identify their attitudes toward and role in curriculum development. Survey findings, based on a 53% response rate (n=114), included the following: (1) on average, the respondents were 53 years old, male (88.6%), held graduate degrees in education, and had been in their current positions for 9 years; (2) taken together, liberal arts and occupational education had accounted for more than 82% of the institutions' curricula when the presidents arrived, and would, if left to the presidents, decline to 77.6%, while the community services and remedial/developmental curricula combined would increase from 17% to 22.6%; (3) while nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported very limited involvement in new course adoption or course revision, a vast majority indicated that they were "very much involved" in new program approval (92.8%), and in course/program deletion (79.3%); (4) with regard to national trends over the next 5 years, the presidents anticipated an increased need for remedial education and English as a Second Language offerings, followed by an increased demand for curricula to meet transfer and occupational needs; and (5) the presidents had a tendency to view issues concerning curriculum and the colleges' usefulness to the community as separate arenas of decision making. Data tables and a summary of suggestions for further research are included. (MPH)

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PRESIDENTS AND CURRICULUM

Judith S. Eaton*

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PRESIDENTS AND CURRICULUM

Judith S. Eaton*

In December 1991, the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer, in cooperation with the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, conducted a national random survey of two-year college presidents to assess attitudes toward curriculum. The presidents were leaders of institutions affiliated with the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC, now the American Association of Community Colleges, AACC). Of the 218 presidents surveyed, 114 (53 percent) responded. On average, these CEOs were 53 years old, male (88.6 percent), and held graduate degrees in education. They had been in their current positions for an average of nine years.

The presidents were asked about the major functions of the comprehensive community college as expressed through curricular offerings: the collegiate/transfer function (liberal arts), the occupational function (vocational, business, technological), the remedial/developmental function, and the community service function (continuing education for personal or professional development). They also were asked about curricular change: how course and program approval or deletion took place on their campuses. They were asked to identify trends in community college curricula over the next five years, both nationally and at their institutions. Finally, they were asked to comment on the ways in which their community colleges could be most useful to their respective communities.

PRESIDENTIAL PERCEPTIONS OF CURRICULAR OFFERINGS

Presidents described the curricula of their respective institutions by identifying the distribution of course offerings: the percentages of curricula that were devoted to the liberal arts, to occupational education, to remedial/developmental education, and to community service. They were asked to describe these distributions both at the time they arrived at the institution and at the time of the survey. They also were asked to indicate the distributions that they thought were most appropriate—if they had complete freedom of choice in curricular decisions. (See Table 1.)

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Table 1

	Liberal Arts	Occupational	Remedial/Developmental	Community Service	Total
a. What was the percentage of curriculum devoted to these college functions when you <u>first became</u> president?	43.16	39.73	9.92	7.16	100
b. What percentages apply <u>currently</u> ?	42.39	35.87	13.56	8.15	100
c. What are the percentage trends you foresee in the <u>next five years</u> ?	41.56	34.30	15.22	8.90	100
d. If you had complete choice in the matter, what emphasis would you assign to each of these four functions?	40.66	36.66	11.84	10.81	100

Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges and the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer, American Council on Education, Presidential Leadership and Community College Curricula Study, 1991.

Presidents do not perceive that there is a single dominant curriculum in their institutions. Offerings are fairly evenly divided between liberal arts and occupational education, with some edge to the liberal arts. Taken together, liberal arts and occupational education accounted for more than 82 percent of the institution's curricula when the presidents arrived and would, if left to the presidents, decline to 77.6 percent. Growth would occur mainly in the community service curricula. Taken together, community service and remedial/developmental curricula would (if these presidents had their way) grow from 17.0 percent to 22.6 percent. No single curriculum would dominate if the presidents had a free hand.

The presidents offer two comments on the liberal arts curricula at their respective institutions. It is virtually unchanged in scope since the presidents took office and they would prefer that its scope be modestly reduced. With regard to occupational offerings, these had declined slightly during the tenure of the presidents and were expected to decline further. The presidents felt that this was appropriate. Remedial/developmental curricula had increased during the presidents' time at their institutions. They expected an additional increase in the next five years. If left to them, the presidents would resist this expansion. Community service curricula had expanded and were expected to expand further in the future. This was viewed by the presidents as desirable.

THE PROCESS OF CURRICULAR CHANGE

Presidents also were asked to describe their involvement in curricular change at their institutions. More than two-thirds of them indicated that they had very limited involvement in new course adoption or course revision. In contrast, more than 90 percent reported that they were very much involved in new program approval, and almost 80 percent reported being very much involved in course/program deletion. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

	Very Much Involved	Involved Very Little
a. New Course Adoption	30.6%	69.4%
b. Revised Course Adoption	15.5%	84.5%
c. New Program Approval	92.8%	7.2%
d. Course/Program Deletion	79.3%	20.5%

Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges and the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer, American Council on Education, Presidential Leadership and Community College Curricula Study, 1991.

NATIONAL TRENDS

With regard to national trends over the next five years, presidents anticipated an increased need for remedial education and English-as-a-Second Language (ESL), followed by an increased demand for curricula to meet transfer needs and the need for additional occupational programs. Expanding community service functions and diminishing occupational programs were cited as least likely to occur. These trends were thought to apply to their respective institutions, as well. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

What trends do you anticipate in the next five years? Please rank order, with 1 indicating the most likely and 5, the least.		
	<u>Nationally</u>	<u>At Your College</u>
a. The community college will move toward developing more occupational programs.	2.81	2.8
b. Occupational programs will shrink to meet a diminished variety of fields.	4.04	3.8
c. The number of students transferring will increase.	2.2	2.1
d. The need for ESL and remedial education will grow to reflect changing populations.	2.1	2.5
e. Community service functions will continue to grow.	3.4	3.3

Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges and the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer, American Council on Education, Presidential Leadership and Community College Curricula Study, 1991.

USEFULNESS TO THE COMMUNITY

When asked how community colleges could be most useful to their communities, presidents identified, in order of importance, training for future work or career upgrading, preparing more students for transfer, and stressing developmental and remedial education. Additional student services for personal development, embedding the liberal arts in noncredit instruction, and working to strengthen accreditation were least important. Their perception of usefulness at the local level was mirrored at the national level. (See Table 4.)

Table 4

How do you think community colleges could be most useful to their communities? Please rank 1, 2, and 3 for the top three and 8 for the bottom statement.		
	<u>Nationally</u>	<u>At Your College</u>
a. Train more people for future work or career upgrading.	*H: 87.7%	H: 91.2%
b. Prepare more students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities.	H: 70.2%	H: 75.4%
c. Stress remedial/developmental education.	H: 62.3%	H: 57.0%
d. Encourage people to use the community college as a center for their own personal development.	H: 25.4%	H: 34.2%
e. Embed the liberal arts in noncredit programs in order to expose a greater number of people to the arts and sciences.	H: 4.4%	H: 4.4%
f. Provide more student services to support academic goals.	H: 15.8%	H: 19.3%
g. Work directly with four-year institutions to develop productive accreditation policies.	H: 6.8%	H: 7.0%
h. Establish more student services for personal development.	H: 2.6%	H: 1.8%
i. Devote more financial resources to complexes for the arts.	H: 0	H: 0

* H = Percentage who rated usefulness as 1, 2, or 3.

Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges and the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer, American Council on Education, Presidential Leadership and Community College Curricula Study, 1991.



DISCUSSION

Two major observations can be made on the basis of this brief survey:

1. In general, community college presidents have experienced—and expect—little change in the way curricular offerings are distributed at their respective institutions. At the same time, they do expect some changes in both local and national needs for community college services. This can produce discontinuity between curricular offerings and the needs presidents claim their colleges will serve. For example, presidents see occupational education as most useful, but they do not anticipate more offerings in this area. The presidents are more consistent with developmental and remedial education, anticipating both need and expansion of offerings.
2. According to this survey, presidents have limited involvement in course development—the fundamental building blocks of curriculum change—both politically and intellectually. The majority are not highly visible in the early stages of the curriculum change process. New program development is sometimes the culmination of a series of independent decisions to adopt individual courses. These decisions about courses, then, have strong implications for what happens at the program level. To remain distant from curricular change at the grassroots level is to limit a key opportunity to influence curriculum.

These insights, in turn, suggest two questions about presidents and the curriculum:

- Should presidents be more involved in curricular change? If so, how can presidents manage curricular change so that they complement—not compromise—the leadership of faculty and academic administrators?
- How can presidents preclude the discontinuity between curriculum decisions and perceptions of how the college can be most useful that is suggested by the survey?

The following observations, which go beyond the responses offered by the presidents involved in the survey, address these questions and their importance in understanding the presidents' role in educational leadership.

INVOLVEMENT IN CURRICULAR CHANGE

The survey indicated that presidents are extremely involved in final decision making about programs (followed, in all likelihood, with recommendations to governing boards and state approval). While these efforts are valuable and important, they may not be enough. To further influence the direction of curriculum—a central act of academic leadership for a president—presidents might consider further engagement at the course approval level. They might consider additional involvement at the earliest stages of curriculum development.

The curriculum is one of the most significant statements an institution makes about commitment to learning. Decisions about curriculum content are also decisions about what is important to learn. Decisions about curriculum structure are decisions about how knowledge should be organized. The organization of knowledge has a profound impact on the intellectual development of students—how they view the world. The decisions about content and structure, taken together, imply value judgments about the nature of society and the individual. These value judgments are identified with the institution as a whole, and the president alone has unique responsibility at this level. Throughout much of higher education—including community colleges—presidents appear to have diminished their attention to this responsibility, dealing instead with budgetary, political,

and community matters. While these are crucial in these difficult times, they cannot eliminate concern for academic leadership.

Presidential involvement in curricular decision making is both formal and informal. At the formal level, presidents can be involved in final decision-making about new and revised courses—as well as programs. This needs to be based on a carefully considered educational philosophy and a vision of the future educational effectiveness of the institution. The president can use course approval authority to understand the formative stages of new programs and to make early judgments about the future direction of curriculum content and structure. He or she can also use this authority to influence the formative stages through discussions about direction and content of the curriculum generally.

In addition to exercising this decision-making authority, presidents can, from time to time, meet formally with curriculum committees. They can request an annual report about curriculum committee action and decisions. They can devote some president's staff meetings to discussion of curricular issues. They can keep curriculum on the agenda of governing board meetings. They can use program review, accreditation, self-study, and assessment initiatives to focus on curricular issues.

On an informal level, presidents can meet with academic departments. They can sponsor institutional fora on important curricular matters. They need to keep up with the general literature on curriculum in higher education. Presidents can bring speakers who are knowledgeable about curriculum to campus. They can meet regularly with academic administrators. They can share their ideas through campus newsletters and issue papers from the president's office.

There is an important caveat, however. These laudable actions by the president can undermine the roles of the chief academic officer (CAO) and other academic administrators. This need not and should not be the case. The president's challenge is to be involved, but not too much. Thus, a president may consult regularly with his or her chief academic officer about pending course or program development. A president, through his or her articulation of educational philosophy, may lay a foundation for the academic administrators' decisions. If a president is interested in pursuing a particular curricular initiative, it may be developed in concert with the chief academic officer and it must follow standard curriculum approval procedures. But a president cannot make curricular decisions independent of the chief academic officer, routinely reject a CAO's recommendations for new courses and programs, or become involved in the day-to-day implementation of curricular change, which is the responsibility of the CAO. These actions would weaken the needed authority of the chief academic officer and other academic administrators.

CURRICULUM AND USEFULNESS

The survey suggests that presidents may view curriculum and usefulness to the community as separate arenas of decision making. This tendency to separate curriculum and usefulness is a natural by-product of the way in which community colleges generally separate their functions: the "academic," for example, is separated from community service. Decisions about curriculum, however, are frequently intertwined with decisions about usefulness. It behooves a president to ask "What is our primary business?" If the answer is "the providing of educational service," then curricula are playing a powerful role. There are two suggestions here. First, educational service is primary. Second, curricular decisions are central to its delivery. Thus, when presidents in the survey maintain that their institutions can be most useful by offering more occupational or transfer education (Table 4), but assign a declining percentage to these areas (Table 1), they may not be connecting the curriculum and usefulness decisions.

Strengthening the relationship between the curriculum and usefulness to the community begins with a realization. For the most part, community college leaders define usefulness in terms of

a broad range of services that include curricular offerings but go well beyond them. For example, usefulness is often described as providing training, offering day care, making facilities available, and providing noncredit instruction. Because usefulness goes well beyond direct instruction, the connection between curriculum and usefulness is blurred. The president can provide leadership in clarifying the use of curriculum in the providing of some services. This, in turn, will establish a clear connection between curriculum and usefulness.

SUMMARY

This brief survey of presidents and curriculum provides a tentative but provocative insight into the need for further presidential involvement in curricular matters, especially at the early formative stages. It suggests avenues for further research:

- More detailed review and analysis of the presidential role in curriculum decision making, especially course approval;
- Additional attention to the role of the president as academic leader through formal and informal attention to curriculum;
- Further study of the presidential–chief academic officer relationship to establish a solid foundation for shared academic leadership.
- Further study of the relationship between curriculum and usefulness through, for example, examining the role that curriculum decisions play in providing services.

Presidents contribute much to the professional life of their community colleges. They are in a position to strengthen the intellectual dimension of that contribution through enhanced formal and informal involvement in curricular decision making.



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